MERE LITERATURE

WOODROW WILSON

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

THE three essays included in this volume first saw the light a score of years ago, "Mere Literature" in the Atlantic for December, 1893, "The Author Himself" in the Atlantic for September, 1891, and "On an Author's Choice of Company" in the Century Magazine for March, 1896. They were included with five other papers, chiefly political, in "Mere Literature and Other Essays," published in 1896. It has seemed to the publishers that the election of the author to the office of President of the United States, an event which men of letters everywhere have felt to be of importance in the history of letters, makes appropriate the reissue of these three essays in the Riverside Press Series.

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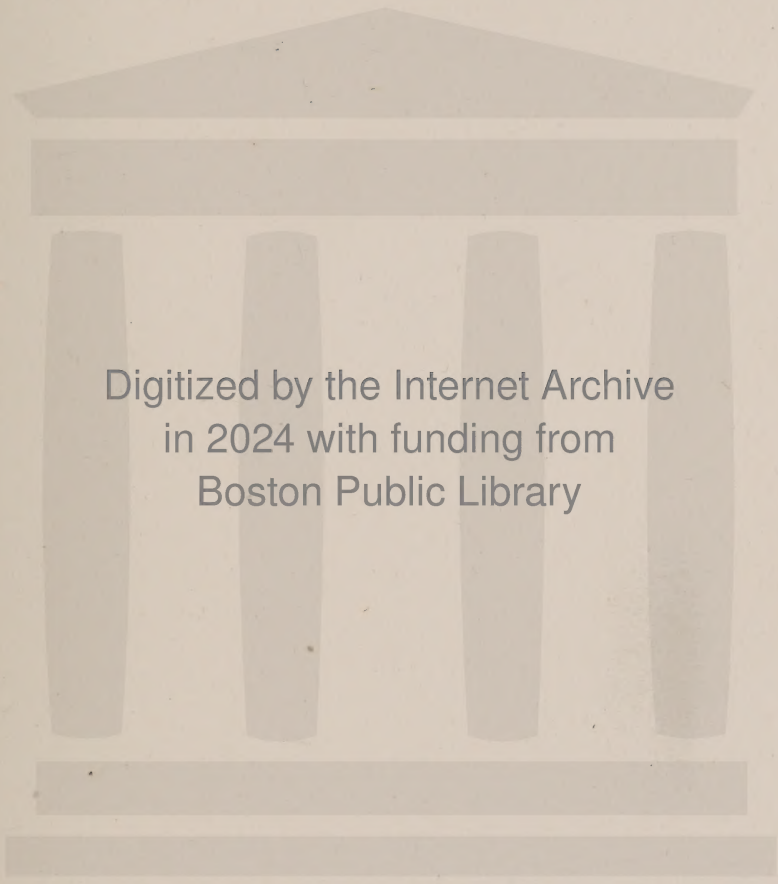
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BY WOODROW WILSON

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I

"MERE LITERATURE"

MERE LITERATURE

I

"MERE LITERATURE"

A SINGULAR phrase this, "mere literature," —the irreverent invention of a scientific age. Literature we know, but "mere" literature? We are not to read it as if it meant *sheer* literature, literature in the essence, stripped of all accidental or ephemeral elements, and left with nothing but its immortal charm and power. "Mere literature" is a serious sneer, conceived in all honesty by the scientific mind, which despises things that do not fall within the categories of demonstrable knowledge. It means *nothing but literature*, as who should say, "mere talk," "mere fabrication," "mere pastime." The scientist, with his head comfortably and excusably full of knowable things, takes nothing seriously and with his hat off, except

human knowledge. The creations of the human spirit are, from his point of view, incalculable vagaries, irresponsible phenomena, to be regarded only as play, and, for the mind's good, only as recreation, — to be used to while away the tedium of a railway journey, or to amuse a period of rest or convalescence; mere byplay, mere make-believe.

And so very whimsical things sometimes happen, because of this scientific and positivist spirit of the age, when the study of the literature of any language is made part of the curriculum of our colleges. The more delicate and subtle purposes of the study are put quite out of countenance, and literature is commanded to assume the phrases and the methods of science. It would be very painful if it should turn out that schools and universities were agencies of Philistinism; but there are some things which should prepare us for such a discovery. Our present plans for teaching everybody involve certain unpleasant things quite

inevitably. It is obvious that you cannot have universal education without restricting your teaching to such things as can be universally understood. It is plain that you cannot impart "university methods" to thousands, or create "investigators" by the score, unless you confine your university education to matters which dull men can investigate, your laboratory training to tasks which mere plodding diligence and submissive patience can compass. Yet, if you do so limit and constrain what you teach, you thrust taste and insight and delicacy of perception out of the schools, exalt the obvious and the merely useful above the things which are only imaginatively or spiritually conceived, make education an affair of tasting and handling and smelling, and so create Philistia, that country in which they speak of "mere literature." I suppose that in Nirvana one would speak in like wise of "mere life."

The fear, at any rate, that such things may happen cannot fail to set us anxiously pon-

dering certain questions about the systematic teaching of literature in our schools and colleges. How are we to impart classical writings to the children of the general public? "Beshrew the general public!" cries Mr. Birrell. "What in the name of the Bodleian has the general public got to do with literature?" Unfortunately, it has a great deal to do with it; for are we not complacently forcing the general public into our universities, and are we not arranging that all its sons shall be instructed how they may themselves master and teach our literature? You have nowadays, it is believed, only to heed the suggestions of pedagogics in order to know how to impart Burke or Browning, Dryden or Swift. There are certain practical difficulties, indeed; but there are ways of overcoming them. You must have strength if you would handle with real mastery the firm fibre of these men; you must have a heart, moreover, to feel their warmth, an eye to see what they see, an imagination to keep them

company, a pulse to experience their delights. But if you have none of these things, you may make shift to do without them. You may count the words they use, instead, note the changes of phrase they make in successive revisions, put their rhythm into a scale of feet, run their allusions — particularly their female allusions — to cover, detect them in their previous reading. Or, if none of these things please you, or you find the big authors difficult or dull, you may drag to light all the minor writers of their time, who are easy to understand. By setting an example in such methods you render great services in certain directions. You make the higher degrees of our universities available for the large number of respectable men who can count and measure and search diligently; and that may prove no small matter. You divert attention from thought, which is not always easy to get at, and fix attention upon language, as upon a curious mechanism, which can be perceived with the bodily eye, and which is worthy

to be studied for its own sake, quite apart from anything it may mean. You encourage the examination of forms, grammatical and metrical, which can be quite accurately determined and quite exhaustively catalogued. You bring all the visible phenomena of writing to light and into ordered system. You go further, and show how to make careful literal identification of stories somewhere told ill and without art with the same stories told over again by the masters, well and with the transfiguring effect of genius. You thus broaden the area of science; for you rescue the concrete phenomena of the expression of thought—the necessary syllabification which accompanies it, the inevitable juxtaposition of words, the constant use of particles, the habitual display of roots, the inveterate repetition of names, the recurrent employment of meanings heard or read — from their confusion with the otherwise unclassifiable manifestations of what had hitherto been accepted, without critical examination,

under the lump term "literature," simply for the pleasure and spiritual edification to be got from it.

An instructive differentiation ensues. In contrast with the orderly phenomena of speech and writing, which are amenable to scientific processes of examination and classification, and which take rank with the orderly successions of change in nature, we have what, for want of a more exact term, we call "mere literature," — the literature which is not an expression of form, but an expression of spirit. This is a fugitive and troublesome thing, and perhaps does not belong in well-conceived plans of universal instruction; for it offers many embarrassments to pedagogic method. It escapes all scientific categories. It is not pervious to research. It is too wayward to be brought under the discipline of exposition. It is an attribute of so many different substances at one and the same time, that the consistent scientific man must needs put it forth from his company, as

without responsible connections. By "mere literature" he means mere evanescent color, wanton trick of phrase, perverse departures from categorical statement, — something *all* personal equation, such stuff as dreams are made of.

We must not all, however, be impatient of this truant child of fancy. When the schools cast her out, she will stand in need of friendly succor, and we must train our spirits for the function. We must be free-hearted in order to make her happy, for she will accept entertainment from no sober, prudent fellow who shall counsel her to mend her ways. She has always made light of hardship, and she has never loved or obeyed any, save those who were of her own mind, — those who were indulgent to her humors, responsive to her ways of thought, attentive to her whims, content with her "mere" charms. She already has her small following of devotees, like all charming, capricious mistresses. There are some still who

think that to know her is better than a liberal education.

There is but one way in which you can take mere literature as an education, and that is directly, at first hand. Almost any media except her own language and touch and tone are non-conducting. A descriptive catalogue of a collection of paintings is no substitute for the little areas of color and form themselves. You do not want to hear about a beautiful woman, simply, — how she was dressed, how she bore herself, how the fine color flowed sweetly here and there upon her cheeks, how her eyes burned and melted, how her voice thrilled through the ears of those about her. If you have ever seen a woman, these things but tantalize and hurt you, if you cannot see her. You want to be in her presence. You know that only your own eyes can give you direct knowledge of her. Nothing but her presence contains her life. 'T is the same with the authentic products of literature. You can never get their beauty at sec-

ond hand, or feel their power except by direct contact with them.

It is a strange and occult thing how this quality of "mere literature" enters into one book, and is absent from another; but no man who has once felt it can mistake it. I was reading the other day a book about Canada. It is written in what the reviewers have pronounced to be an "admirable, spirited style." By this I take them to mean that it is grammatical, orderly, and full of strong adjectives. But these reviewers would have known more about the style in which it is written if they had noted what happens on page 84. There a quotation from Burke occurs. "There is," says Burke, "but one healing, catholic principle of toleration which ought to find favor in this house. It is wanted not only in our colonies, but here. The thirsty earth of our own country is gasping and gaping and crying out for that healing shower from heaven. The noble lord has told you of the right of those people by treaty; but I consider

the right of conquest so little, and the right of human nature so much, that the former has very little consideration with me. I look upon the people of Canada as coming by the dispensation of God under the British government. I would have us govern it in the same manner as the all-wise disposition of Providence would govern it. We know he suffers the sun to shine upon the righteous and the unrighteous; and we ought to suffer all classes to enjoy equally the right of worshiping God according to the light he has been pleased to give them." The peculiarity of such a passage as that is, that it needs no context. Its beauty seems almost independent of its subject matter. It comes on that eighty-fourth page like a burst of music in the midst of small talk, — a tone of sweet harmony heard amidst a rattle of phrases. The mild noise was unobjectionable enough until the music came. There is a breath and stir of life in those sentences of Burke's which is to be perceived in nothing else in that volume. Your pulses

catch a quicker movement from them, and are stronger on their account.

It is so with all essential literature. It has a quality to move you, and you can never mistake it, if you have any blood in you. And it has also a power to instruct you which is as effective as it is subtle, and which no research or systematic method can ever rival. 'T is a sore pity if that power cannot be made available in the classroom. It is not merely that it quickens your thought and fills your imagination with the images that have illuminated the choicer minds of the race. It does indeed exercise the faculties in this wise, bringing them into the best atmosphere, and into the presence of the men of greatest charm and force; but it does a great deal more than that. It acquaints the mind, by direct contact, with the forces which really govern and modify the world from generation to generation. There is more of a nation's politics to be got out of its poetry than out of all its systematic writers upon public affairs and

constitutions. Epics are better mirrors of manners than chronicles; dramas oftentimes let you into the secrets of statutes; orations stirred by a deep energy of emotion or resolution, passionate pamphlets that survive their mission because of the direct action of their style along permanent lines of thought, contain more history than parliamentary journals. It is not knowledge that moves the world, but ideals, convictions, the opinions or fancies that have been held or followed; and whoever studies humanity ought to study it alive, practice the vivisection of reading literature, and acquaint himself with something more than anatomies which are no longer in use by spirits.

There are some words of Thibaut, the great jurist, which have long seemed to me singularly penetrative of one of the secrets of the intellectual life. "I told him," he says, — he is speaking of an interview with Niebuhr, — "I told him that I owed my gayety and vigor, in great part, to my love for the classics of all

ages, even those outside the domain of jurisprudence." Not only the gayety and vigor of his hale old age, surely, but also his insight into the meaning and purpose of laws and institutions. The jurist who does not love the classics of all ages is like a post-mortem doctor presiding at a birth, a maker of manikins prescribing for a disease of the blood, a student of masks setting up for a connoisseur in smiles and kisses. In narrating history, you are speaking of what was done by men; in discoursing of laws, you are seeking to show what courses of action, and what manner of dealing with one another, men have adopted. You can neither tell the story nor conceive the law till you know how the men you speak of regarded themselves and one another; and I know of no way of learning this but by reading the stories they have told of themselves, the songs they have sung, the heroic adventures they have applauded. I must know what, if anything, they revered; I must hear their sneers and gibes; must learn in what

accents they spoke love within the family circle; with what grace they obeyed their superiors in station; how they conceived it politic to live, and wise to die; how they esteemed property, and what they deemed privilege; when they kept holiday, and why; when they were prone to resist oppression, and wherefore, — I must see things with their eyes, before I can comprehend their law books. Their jural relationships are not independent of their way of living, and their way of thinking is the mirror of their way of living.

It is doubtless due to the scientific spirit of the age that these plain, these immemorial truths are in danger of becoming obscured. Science, under the influence of the conception of evolution, devotes itself to the study of forms, of specific differences, of the manner in which the same principle of life manifests itself variously under the compulsions of changes of environment. It is thus that it has become "scientific" to set forth the manner in which

man's nature submits to man's circumstances; scientific to disclose morbid moods, and the conditions which produce them; scientific to regard man, not as the centre or source of power, but as subject to power, a register of external forces instead of an originative soul, and character as a product of man's circumstances rather than a sign of man's mastery over circumstance. It is thus that it has become "scientific" to analyze language as itself a commanding element in man's life. The history of word-roots, their modification under the influences of changes wrought in the vocal organs by habit or by climate, the laws of phonetic change to which they are obedient, and their persistence under all disguises of dialect, as if they were full of a self-originated life, a self-directed energy of influence, is united with the study of grammatical forms in the construction of scientific conceptions of the evolution and uses of human speech. The impression is created that literature is only the chosen vessel

of these forms, disclosing to us their modification in use and structure from age to age. Such vitality as the masterpieces of genius possess comes to seem only a dramatization of the fortunes of words. Great writers construct for the adventures of language their appropriate epics. Or, if it be not the words themselves that are scrutinized, but the style of their use, that style becomes, instead of a fine essence of personality, a matter of cadence merely, or of grammatical and structural relationships. Science is the study of the forces of the world of matter, the adjustments, the apparatus, of the universe; and the scientific study of literature has likewise become a study of apparatus, — of the forms in which men utter thought, and the forces by which those forms have been and still are being modified, rather than of thought itself.

The essences of literature of course remain the same under all forms, and the true study of literature is the study of these essences, — a

study, not of forms or of differences, but of likenesses, — likenesses of spirit and intent under whatever varieties of method, running through all forms of speech like the same music along the chords of various instruments. There is a sense in which literature is independent of form, just as there is a sense in which music is independent of its instrument. It is my cherished belief that Apollo's pipe contained as much eloquent music as any modern orchestra. Some books live; many die: wherein is the secret of immortality? Not in beauty of form, nor even in force of passion. We might say of literature what Wordsworth said of poetry, the most easily immortal part of literature: it is "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science; it is the breath of the finer spirit of all knowledge." Poetry has the easier immortality because it has the sweeter accent when it speaks, because its phrases linger in our ears to delight them, because its truths are also melodies. Prose has

much to overcome, — its plainness of visage, its less musical accents, its homelier turns of phrase. But it also may contain the immortal essence of truth and seriousness and high thought. It too may clothe conviction with the beauty that must make it shine forever. Let a man but have beauty in his heart, and, believing something with his might, put it forth arrayed as he sees it, the lights and shadows falling upon it on his page as they fall upon it in his heart, and he may die assured that that beauty will not pass away out of the world.

Biographers have often been puzzled by the contrast between certain men as they lived and as they wrote. Schopenhauer's case is one of the most singular. A man of turbulent life, suffering himself to be cut to exasperation by the petty worries of his lot, he was nevertheless calm and wise when he wrote, as if the Muse had rebuked him. He wrote at a still elevation, where small and temporary things did not come to disturb him. 'T is a pity that

for some men this elevation is so far to seek. They lose permanency by not finding it. Could there be a deliberate regimen of life for the author, it is plain enough how he ought to live, not as seeking fame, but as deserving it.

"Fame, like a wayward girl, will still be coy
To those who woo her with too slavish knees;
But makes surrender to some thoughtless boy,
And dotes the more upon a heart at ease.

. . . . . .

"Ye love-sick bards, repay her scorn with scorn;
Ye love-sick artists, madmen that ye are,
Make your best bow to her and bid adieu;
Then, if she likes it, she will follow you."

It behooves all minor authors to realize the possibility of their being discovered some day, and exposed to the general scrutiny. They ought to live as if conscious of the risk. They ought to purge their hearts of everything that is not genuine and capable of lasting the world a century, at least, if need be. Mere literature is made of spirit. The difficulties of style are the artist's difficulties with his tools. The spirit

that is in the eye, in the pose, in mien or gesture, the painter must find in his color-box ; as he must find also the spirit that nature displays upon the face of the fields or in the hidden places of the forest. The writer has less obvious means. Word and spirit do not easily consort. The language which the philologists set out before us with such curious erudition is of very little use as a vehicle for the essences of the human spirit. It is too sophisticated and self-conscious. What you need is, not a critical knowledge of language, but a quick feeling for it. You must recognize the affinities between your spirit and its idioms. You must immerse your phrase in your thought, your thought in your phrase, till each becomes saturated with the other. Then what you produce is as necessarily fit for permanency as if it were incarnated spirit.

And you must produce in color, with the touch of imagination which lifts what you write away from the dull levels of mere exposition.

Black-and-white sketches may serve some purposes of the artist, but very little of actual nature is in mere black-and-white. The imagination never works thus with satisfaction. Nothing is ever conceived completely when conceived so grayly, without suffusion of real light. The mind creates, as great Nature does, in colors, with deep chiaroscuro and burning lights. This is true not only of poetry and essentially imaginative writing, but also of the writing which seeks nothing more than to penetrate the meaning of actual affairs, — the writing of the greatest historians and philosophers, the utterances of orators and of the great masters of political exposition. Their narratives, their analyses, their appeals, their conceptions of principle, are all dipped deep in the colors of the life they expound. Their minds respond only to realities, their eyes see only actual circumstance. Their sentences quiver and are quick with visions of human affairs, — how minds are bent or governed, how action is shaped or

thwarted. The great "constructive" minds, as we call them, are of this sort. They "construct" by seeing what others have not imagination enough to see. They do not always know more, but they always realize more. Let the singular reconstruction of Roman history and institutions by Theodor Mommsen serve as an illustration. Safe men distrust this great master. They cannot find what he finds in the documents. They will draw you truncated figures of the antique Roman state, and tell you the limbs cannot be found, the features of the face have nowhere been unearthed. They will cite you fragments such as remain, and show you how far these can be pieced together toward the making of a complete description of private life and public function in those first times when the Roman commonwealth was young; but what the missing sentences were they can only weakly conjecture. Their eyes cannot descry those distant days with no other aids than these. Only the greatest are dissatisfied,

and go on to paint that ancient life with the materials that will render it lifelike,— the materials of the constructive imagination. They have other sources of information. They see living men in the old documents. Give them but the torso, and they will supply head and limbs, bright and animate as they must have been. If Mommsen does not quite do that, another man, with Mommsen's eye and a touch more of color on his brush, might have done it, — may yet do it.

It is in this way that we get some glimpse of the only relations that scholarship bears to literature. Literature can do without exact scholarship, or any scholarship at all, though it may impoverish itself thereby; but scholarship can not do without literature. It needs literature to float it, to set it current, to authenticate it to the race, to get it out of closets, and into the brains of men who stir abroad. It will adorn literature, no doubt; literature will be the richer for its presence; but it will not, it cannot,

of itself create literature. Rich stuffs from the East do not create a king, nor warlike trappings a conqueror. There is, indeed, a natural antagonism, let it be frankly said, between the standards of scholarship and the standards of literature. Exact scholarship values things in direct proportion as they are verifiable; but literature knows nothing of such tests. The truths which it seeks are the truths of self-expression. It is a thing of convictions, of insights, of what is felt and seen and heard and hoped for. Its meanings lurk behind nature, not in the facts of its phenomena. It speaks of things as the man who utters it saw them, not necessarily as God made them. The personality of the speaker runs throughout all the sentences of real literature. That personality may not be the personality of a poet: it may be only the personality of the penetrative seer. It may not have the atmosphere in which visions are seen, but only that in which men and affairs look keenly cut in outline, boldly massed in bulk,

consummately grouped in detail, to the reader as to the writer. Sentences of perfectly clarified wisdom may be literature no less than stanzas of inspired song, or the intense utterances of impassioned feeling. The personality of the sunlight is in the keen lines of light that run along the edges of a sword no less than in the burning splendor of the rose or the radiant kindlings of a woman's eye. You may feel the power of one master of thought playing upon your brain as you may feel that of another playing upon your heart.

Scholarship gets into literature by becoming part of the originating individuality of a master of thought. No man is a master of thought without being also a master of its vehicle and instrument, style, that subtle medium of all its evasive effects of light and shade. Scholarship is material; it is not life. It becomes immortal only when it is worked upon by conviction, by schooled and chastened imagination, by thought that runs alive out of the inner foun-

tains of individual insight and purpose. Colorless, or without suffusion of light from some source of light, it is dead, and will not twice be looked at; but made part of the life of a great mind, subordinated, absorbed, put forth with authentic stamp of currency on it, minted at some definite mint and bearing some sovereign image, it will even outlast the time when it shall have ceased to deserve the acceptance of scholars, — when it shall, in fact, have become "mere literature."

Scholarship is the realm of nicely adjusted opinion. It is the business of scholars to assess evidence and test conclusions, to discriminate values and reckon probabilities. Literature is the realm of conviction and vision. Its points of view are as various as they are oftentimes unverifiable. It speaks individual faiths. Its groundwork is not erudition, but reflection and fancy. Your thoroughgoing scholar dare not reflect. To reflect is to let himself in on his material; whereas what he wants is to keep

himself apart, and view his materials in an air that does not color or refract. To reflect is to throw an atmosphere about what is in your mind, — an atmosphere which holds all the colors of your life. Reflection summons all associations, and they so throng and move that they dominate the mind's stage at once. The plot is in their hands. Scholars, therefore, do not reflect; they label, group kind with kind, set forth in schemes, expound with dispassionate method. Their minds are not stages, but museums; nothing is done there, but very curious and valuable collections are kept there. If literature use scholarship, it is only to fill it with fancies or shape it to new standards, of which of itself it can know nothing.

True, there are books reckoned primarily books of science and of scholarship which have nevertheless won standing as literature; books of science such as Newton wrote, books of scholarship such as Gibbon's. But science was only the vestibule by which such a man as New-

ton entered the temple of nature, and the art he practiced was not the art of exposition, but the art of divination. He was not only a scientist, but also a seer; and we shall not lose sight of Newton because we value what he was more than what he knew. If we continue Gibbon in his fame, it will be for love of his art, not for worship of his scholarship. We some of us, nowadays, know the period of which he wrote better even than he did; but which one of us shall build so admirable a monument to ourselves, as artists, out of what we know? The scholar finds his immortality in the form he gives to his work. It is a hard saying, but the truth of it is inexorable: be an artist, or prepare for oblivion. You may write a chronicle, but you will not serve yourself thereby. You will only serve some fellow who shall come after you, possessing, what you did not have, an ear for the words you could not hit upon; an eye for the colors you could not see; a hand for the strokes you missed.

Real literature you can always distinguish by its form, and yet it is not possible to indicate the form it should have. It is easy to say that it should have a form suitable to its matter; but how suitable? Suitable to set the matter off, adorn, embellish it, or suitable simply to bring it directly, quick and potent, to the apprehension of the reader? This is the question of style, about which many masters have had many opinions; upon which you can make up no safe generalization from the practice of those who have unquestionably given to the matter of their thought immortal form, an accent or a countenance never to be forgotten. Who shall say how much of Burke's splendid and impressive imagery is part and stuff of his thought, or tell why even that part of Newman's prose which is devoid of ornament, stripped to its shining skin, and running bare and lithe and athletic to carry its tidings to men, should promise to enjoy as certain an immortality? Why should Lamb go so quaintly and elaborately to work

upon his critical essays, taking care to perfume every sentence, if possible, with the fine savor of an old phrase, if the same business could be as effectively done in the plain and even cadences of Mr. Matthew Arnold's prose? Why should Gibbon be so formal, so stately, so elaborate, when he had before his eyes the example of great Tacitus, whose direct, sententious style had outlived by so many hundred years the very language in which he wrote? In poetry, who shall measure the varieties of style lavished upon similar themes? The matter of vital thought is not separable from the thinker; its forms must suit his handling as well as fit his conception. Any style is author's stuff which is suitable to his purpose and his fancy. He may use rich fabrics with which to costume his thoughts, or he may use simple stone from which to sculpture them, and leave them bare. His only limits are those of art. He may not indulge a taste for the merely curious or fantastic. The quaint writers have quaint thoughts; their

material is suitable. They do not merely satisfy themselves as virtuosi, with collections of odd phrases and obsolete meanings. They needed twisted words to fit the eccentric patterns of their thought. The great writer has always dignity, restraint, propriety, adequateness; what time he loses these qualities he ceases to be great. His style neither creaks nor breaks under his passion, but carries the strain with unshaken strength. It is not trivial or mean, but speaks what small meanings fall in its way with simplicity, as conscious of their smallness. Its playfulness is within bounds; its laugh never bursts too boisterously into a guffaw. A great style always knows what it would be at, and does the thing appropriately, with the larger sort of taste.

This is the condemnation of tricks of phrase, devices to catch the attention, exaggerations and loud talk to hold it. No writer can afford to strive after effect, if his striving is to be apparent. For just and permanent effect is missed

altogether unless it be so completely attained as to seem like some touch of sunlight, perfect, natural, inevitable, wrought without effort and without deliberate purpose to be effective. Mere audacity of attempt can, of course, never win the wished for result; and if the attempt be successful, it is not audacious. What we call audacity in a great writer has no touch of temerity, sauciness, or arrogance in it. It is simply high spirit, a dashing and splendid display of strength. Boldness is ridiculous unless it be impressive, and it can be impressive only when backed by solid forces of character and attainment. Your plebeian hack cannot afford the showy paces; only the full-blooded Arabian has the sinew and proportion to lend them perfect grace and propriety. The art of letters eschews the bizarre as rigidly as does every other fine art. It mixes its colors with brains, and is obedient to great Nature's sane standards of right adjustment in all that it attempts.

You can make no catalogue of these feat-

ures of great writing; there is no science of literature. Literature in its essence is mere spirit, and you must experience it rather than analyze it too formally. It is the door to nature and to ourselves. It opens our hearts to receive the experiences of great men and the conceptions of great races. It awakens us to the significance of action and to the singular power of mental habit. It airs our souls in the wide atmosphere of contemplation. "In these bad days, when it is thought more educationally useful to know the principle of the common pump than Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn," as Mr. Birrell says, we cannot afford to let one single precious sentence of "mere literature" go by us unread or unpraised. If this free people to which we belong is to keep its fine spirit, its perfect temper amidst affairs, its high courage in the face of difficulties, its wise temperateness and wide-eyed hope, it must continue to drink deep and often from the old wells of English undefiled, quaff the keen tonic of its

best ideals, keep its blood warm with all the great utterances of exalted purpose and pure principle of which its matchless literature is full. The great spirits of the past must command us in the tasks of the future. Mere literature will keep us pure and keep us strong. Even though it puzzle or altogether escape scientific method, it may keep our horizon clear for us, and our eyes glad to look bravely forth upon the world.

II

THE AUTHOR HIMSELF

II

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WHO can help wondering, concerning the modern multitude of books, where all these companions of his reading hours will be buried when they die; which will have monuments erected to them; which escape the envy of time and live? It is pathetic to think of the number that must be forgotten, after having been removed from the good places to make room for their betters.

Much the most pathetic thought about books, however, is that excellence will not save them. Their fates will be as whimsical as those of the humankind which produces them. Knaves find it as easy to get remembered as good men. It is not right living or learning or kind offices, simply and of themselves, but — something else that gives immortality of fame. Be a book never so scholarly, it may die; be it never so

witty, or never so full of good feeling and of an honest statement of truth, it may not live.

When once a book has become immortal, we think that we can see why it became so. It contained, we perceive, a casting of thought which could not but arrest and retain men's attention; it said some things once and for all because it gave them their best expression. Or else it spoke with a grace or with a fire of imagination, with a sweet cadence of phrase and a full harmony of tone, which have made it equally dear to all generations of those who love the free play of fancy or the incomparable music of perfected human speech. Or perhaps it uttered with candor and simplicity some universal sentiment; perchance pictured something in the tragedy or the comedy of man's life as it was never pictured before, and must on that account be read and read again as not to be superseded. There must be something special, we judge, either in its form or in its substance, to account for its unwonted fame and fortune.

This upon first analysis, taking one book at a time. A look deeper into the heart of the matter enables us to catch at least a glimpse of a single and common source of immortality. The world is attracted by books as each man is attracted by his several friends. You recommend that capital fellow So-and-So to the acquaintance of others because of his discriminating and diverting powers of observation: the very tones and persons — it would seem the very selves — of every type of man live again in his mimicries and descriptions. He is the dramatist of your circle; you can never forget him, nor can any one else; his circle of acquaintances can never grow smaller. Could he live on and retain perennially that wonderful freshness and vivacity of his, he must become the most famous guest and favorite of the world. Who that has known a man quick and shrewd to see dispassionately the inner history, the reason and the ends, of the combinations of society, and at the same time eloquent to tell

of them, with a hold on the attention gained by a certain quaint force and sagacity resident in no other man, can find it difficult to understand why we still resort to Montesquieu? Possibly there are circles favored of the gods who have known some fellow of infinite store of miscellaneous and curious learning, who has greatly diverted both himself and his friends by a way peculiar to himself of giving it out upon any and all occasions, item by item, as if it were all homogeneous and of a piece, and by his odd skill in making unexpected application of it to out-of-the-way, unpromising subjects, as if there were in his view of things mental no such disintegrating element as incongruity. Such a circle would esteem it strange were Burton not beloved of the world. And so of those, if any there be, who have known men of simple, calm, transparent natures, untouched by storm or perplexity, whose talk was full of such serious, placid reflection as seemed to mirror their own reverent hearts,— talk often prosy, but more

often touchingly beautiful, because of its nearness to nature and the solemn truth of life. There may be those, also, who have felt the thrill of personal contact with some stormy peasant nature full of strenuous, unsparing speech concerning men and affairs. These have known why a Wordsworth or a Carlyle must be read by all generations of those who love words of first-hand inspiration. In short, in every case of literary immortality originative personality is present. Not origination simply, — that may be mere invention, which in literature has nothing immortal about it; but origination which takes its stamp and character from the originator, which is his spirit given to the world, which is himself outspoken.

Individuality does not consist in the use of the very personal pronoun, *I:* it consists in tone, in method, in attitude, in point of view; it consists in saying things in such a way that you will yourself be recognized as a force in saying them. Do we not at once know Lamb

when he speaks? And even more formal Addison, does not his speech bewray and endear him to us? His personal charm is less distinct, much less fascinating, than that which goes with what Lamb speaks, but a charm he has sufficient for immortality. In Steele the matter is more impersonal, more mortal. Some of Dr. Johnson's essays, you feel, might have been written by a dictionary. It is impersonal matter that is dead matter. Are you asked who fathered a certain brilliant, poignant bit of political analysis? You say, Why, only Bagehot could have written that. Does a wittily turned verse make you hesitate between laughter at its wit and grave thought because of its deeper, covert meaning? Do you not know that only Lowell could do that? Do you catch a strain of pure Elizabethan music and doubt whether to attribute it to Shakespeare or to another? Do you not *know* the authors who still live?

Now, the noteworthy thing about such individuality is that it will not develop under

every star, or in one place just as well as in another; there is an atmosphere which kills it, and there is an atmosphere which fosters it. The atmosphere which kills it is the atmosphere of sophistication, where cleverness and fashion and knowingness thrive: cleverness, which is froth, not strong drink; fashion, which is a thing assumed, not a thing of nature; and knowingness, which is naught.

Of course there are born, now and again, as tokens of some rare mood of Nature, men of so intense and individual a cast that circumstance and surroundings affect them little more than friction affects an express train. They command their own development without even the consciousness that to command costs strength. These cannot be sophisticated; for sophistication is subordination to the ways of your world. But these are the very greatest and the very rarest; and it is not the greatest and the rarest alone who shape the world and its thought. That is done also by the great

and the merely extraordinary. There is a rank and file in literature, even in the literature of immortality, and these must go much to school to the people about them.

It is by the number and charm of the individualities which it contains that the literature of any country gains distinction. We turn anywhither to know men. The best way to foster literature, if it may be fostered, is to cultivate the author himself, — a plant of such delicate and precarious growth that special soils are needed to produce it in its full perfection. The conditions which foster individuality are those which foster simplicity, thought and action which are direct, naturalness, spontaneity. What are these conditions?

In the first place, a certain helpful ignorance. It is best for the author to be born away from literary centres, or to be excluded from their ruling set if he be born in them. It is best that he start out with his thinking, not knowing how much has been thought and said

about everything. A certain amount of ignorance will insure his sincerity, will increase his boldness and shelter his genuineness, which is his hope of power. Not ignorance of life, but life may be learned in any neighborhood; — not ignorance of the greater laws which govern human affairs, but they may be learned without a library of historians and commentators, by imaginative sense, by seeing better than by reading; — not ignorance of the infinitudes of human circumstance, but these may be perceived without the intervention of universities; — not ignorance of one's self and of one's neighbor; but innocence of the sophistications of learning, its research without love, its knowledge without inspiration, its method without grace; freedom from its shame at trying to know many things as well as from its pride of trying to know but one thing; ignorance of that faith in small confounding facts which is contempt for large reassuring principles.

Our present problem is not how to clarify our reasonings and perfect our analyses, but how to reënrich and reënergize our literature. That literature is suffering, not from ignorance, but from sophistication and self-consciousness; and it is suffering hardly less from excess of logical method. Ratiocination does not keep us pure, render us earnest, or make us individual and specific forces in the world. Those inestimable results are accomplished by whatever implants principle and conviction, whatever quickens with inspiration, fills with purpose and courage, gives outlook, and makes character. Reasoned thinking does indeed clear the mind's atmospheres and lay open to its view fields of action; but it is loving and believing, sometimes hating and distrusting, often prejudice and passion, always the many things which we call the one thing, character, which create and shape our acting. Life quite overtowers logic. Thinking and erudition alone will not equip for the great tasks and triumphs of life

and literature: the persuading of other men's purposes, the entrance into other men's minds to possess them forever. Culture broadens and sweetens literature, but native sentiment and unmarred individuality create it. Not all of mental power lies in the processes of thinking. There is power also in passion, in personality, in simple, native, uncritical conviction, in unschooled feeling. The power of science, of system, is executive, not stimulative. I do not find that I derive inspiration, but only information, from the learned historians and analysts of liberty; but from the sonneteers, the poets, who speak its spirit and its exalted purpose, — who, recking nothing of the historical method, obey only the high method of their own hearts, — what may a man not gain of courage and confidence in the right way of politics?

It is your direct, unhesitating, intent, headlong man, who has his sources in the mountains, who digs deep channels for himself in the

soil of his times and expands into the mighty river, to become a landmark forever; and not your "broad" man, sprung from the schools, who spreads his shallow, extended waters over the wide surfaces of learning, to leave rich deposits, it may be, for other men's crops to grow in, but to be himself dried up by a few score summer noons. The man thrown early upon his own resources, and already become a conqueror of success before being thrown with the literary talkers; the man grown to giant's stature in some rural library, and become exercised there in a giant's prerogatives before ever he has been laughingly told, to his heart's confusion, of scores of other giants dead and forgotten long ago; the man grounded in hope and settled in conviction ere he has discovered how many hopes time has seen buried, how many convictions cruelly given the lie direct by fate; the man who has carried his youth into middle age before going into the chill atmosphere of *blasé* sentiment; the quiet, stern man

who has cultivated literature on a little oatmeal before thrusting himself upon the great world as a prophet and seer; the man who pronounces new eloquence in the rich dialect in which he was bred; the man come up to the capital from the provinces, — these are the men who people the world's mind with new creations, and give to the sophisticated learned of the next generation new names to conjure with.

If you have a candid and well-informed friend among city lawyers, ask him where the best masters of his profession are bred,—in the city or in the country. He will reply without hesitation, "In the country." You will hardly need to have him state the reason. The country lawyer has been obliged to study all parts of the law alike, and he has known no reason why he should not do so. He has not had the chance to make himself a specialist in any one branch of the law, as is the fashion among city practitioners, and he has not coveted the op-

portunity to do it. There would not have been enough special cases to occupy or remunerate him if he had coveted it. He has dared attempt the task of knowing the whole law, and yet without any sense of daring, but as a matter of course. In his own little town, in the midst of his own small library of authorities, it has not seemed to him an impossible task to explore all the topics that engage his profession; the guiding principles, at any rate, of all branches of the great subject were open to him in a few books. And so it often happens that when he has found his sea legs on the sequestered inlets at home, and ventures, as he sometimes will, upon the great, troublous, and much-frequented waters of city practice in search of more work and larger fees, the country lawyer will once and again confound his city-bred brethren by discovering to them the fact that the law is a many-sided thing of principles, and not altogether a one-sided thing of technical rule and arbitrary precedent.

It would seem to be necessary that the author who is to stand as a distinct and imperative individual among the company of those who express the world's thought should come to a hard crystallization before subjecting himself to the tense strain of cities, the corrosive acids of critical circles. The ability to see for one's self is attainable, not by mixing with crowds and ascertaining how they look at things, but by a certain aloofness and self-containment. The solitariness of some genius is not accidental; it is characteristic and essential. To the constructive imagination there are some immortal feats which are possible only in seclusion. The man must heed first and most of all the suggestions of his own spirit; and the world can be seen from windows overlooking the street better than from the street itself.

Literature grows rich, various, full-voiced largely through the re-discovery of truth, by thinking re-thought, by stories re-told, by songs re-sung. The song of human experience

grows richer and richer in its harmonies, and must grow until the full accord and melody are come. If too soon subjected to the tense strain of the city, a man cannot expand; he is beaten out of his natural shape by the incessant impact and press of men and affairs. It will often turn out that the unsophisticated man will display not only more force, but more literary skill even, than the trained *littérateur*. For one thing, he will probably have enjoyed a fresher contact with old literature. He reads not for the sake of a critical acquaintance with this or that author, with no thought of going through all his writings and "working him up," but as he would ride a spirited horse, for love of the life and motion of it.

A general impression seems to have gained currency that the last of the bullying, omniscient critics was buried in the grave of Francis Jeffrey; and it is becoming important to correct the misapprehension. There never was a time when there was more superior know-

ledge, more specialist omniscience, among reviewers than there is to-day; not pretended superior knowledge, but real. Jeffrey's was very real of its kind. For those who write books, one of the special, inestimable advantages of lacking a too intimate knowledge of the "world of letters" consists in not knowing all that is known by those who review books, in ignorance of the fashions among those who construct canons of taste. The modern critic is a leader of fashion. He carries with him the air of a literary worldliness. If your book be a novel, your reviewer will know all previous plots, all former, all possible, motives and situations. You cannot write anything absolutely new for him, and why should you desire to do again what has been done already? If it be a poem, the reviewer's head already rings with the whole gamut of the world's metrical music; he can recognize any simile, recall all turns of phrase, match every sentiment; why seek to please him anew with old things? If it concern

itself with the philosophy of politics, he can and will set himself to test it by the whole history of its kind from Plato down to Benjamin Kidd. How can it but spoil your sincerity to know that your critic will know everything? Will you not be tempted of the devil to anticipate his judgment or his pretensions by pretending to know as much as he?

The literature of creation naturally falls into two kinds: that which interprets nature or human action, and that which interprets self. Both of these may have the flavor of immortality, but neither unless it be free from self-consciousness. No man, therefore, can create after the best manner in either of these kinds who is an *habitué* of the circles made so delightful by those interesting men, the modern *literati*, sophisticated in all the fashions, ready in all the catches of the knowing literary world which centres in the city and the university. He cannot always be simple and straightforward. He cannot be always and without pretension him-

self, bound by no other man's canons of taste in speech or conduct. In the judgment of such circles there is but one thing for you to do if you would gain distinction: you must "beat the record;" you must do certain definite literary feats better than they have yet been done. You are pitted against the literary "field." You are hastened into the paralysis of comparing yourself with others, and thus away from the health of unhesitating self-expression and directness of first-hand vision.

It would be not a little profitable if we could make correct analysis of the proper relations of learning — learning of the critical, accurate sort — to origination, of learning's place in literature. Although learning is never the real parent of literature, but only sometimes its foster-father, and although the native promptings of soul and sense are its best and freshest sources, there is always the danger that learning will claim, in every court of taste which pretends to jurisdiction, exclusive and preëm-

inent rights as the guardian and preceptor of authors. An effort is constantly being made to create and maintain standards of literary worldliness, if I may coin such a phrase. The thorough man of the world affects to despise natural feeling; does at any rate actually despise all displays of it. He has an eye always on his world's best manners, whether native or imported, and is at continual pains to be master of the conventions of society; he will mortify the natural man as much as need be in order to be in good form. What learned criticism essays to do is to create a similar literary worldliness, to establish fashions and conventions in letters.

I have an odd friend in one of the northern counties of Georgia, — a county set off by itself among the mountains, but early found out by refined people in search of summer refuge from the unhealthful air of the southern coast. He belongs to an excellent family of no little culture, but he was surprised in the midst of his

early schooling by the coming on of the war; and education given pause in such wise seldom begins again in the schools. He was left, therefore, to "finish" his mind as best he might in the companionship of the books in his uncle's library. These books were of the old sober sort: histories, volumes of travels, treatises on laws and constitutions, theologies, philosophies more fanciful than the romances encased in neighbor volumes on another shelf. But they were books which were used to being taken down and read; they had been daily companions to the rest of the family, and they became familiar companions to my friend's boyhood. He went to them day after day, because theirs was the only society offered him in the lonely days when uncle and brothers were at the war, and the women were busy about the tasks of the home. How literally did he make those delightful old volumes his familiars, his cronies! He never dreamed the while, however, that he was becoming learned; it never seemed

to occur to him that everybody else did not read just as he did, in just such a library. He found out afterwards, of course, that he had kept much more of such company than had the men with whom he loved to chat at the post-office or around the fire in the village shops, the habitual resorts of all who were socially inclined; but he attributed that to lack of time on their part, or to accident, and has gone on thinking until now that all the books that come within his reach are the natural intimates of man. And so you shall hear him, in his daily familiar talk with his neighbors, draw upon his singular stores of wise, quaint learning with the quiet colloquial assurance, "They tell me," as if books contained current rumor; and quote the poets with the easy unaffectedness with which others cite a common maxim of the street! He has been heard to refer to Dr. Arnold of Rugby as "that school teacher over there in England."

Surely one may treasure the image of this simple, genuine man of learning as the image

of a sort of masterpiece of Nature in her own type of erudition, a perfect sample of the kind of learning that might beget the very highest sort of literature; the literature, namely, of authentic individuality. It is only under one of two conditions that learning will not dull the edge of individuality: first, if one never suspect that it is creditable and a matter of pride to be learned, and so never become learned for the sake of becoming so; or, second, if it never suggest to one that investigation is better than reflection. Learned investigation leads to many good things, but one of these is not great literature, because learned investigation commands, as the first condition of its success, the repression of individuality.

His mind is a great comfort to every man who has one; but a heart is not often to be so conveniently possessed. Hearts frequently give trouble; they are straightforward and impulsive, and can seldom be induced to be prudent. They must be schooled before they

will become insensible; they must be coached before they can be made to care first and most for themselves: and in all cases the mind must be their schoolmaster and coach. They are irregular forces; but the mind may be trained to observe all points of circumstance and all motives of occasion.

No doubt it is considerations of this nature that must be taken to explain the fact that our universities are erected entirely for the service of the tractable mind, while the heart's only education must be gotten from association with its neighbor heart, and in the ordinary courses of the world. Life is its only university. Mind is monarch, whose laws claim supremacy in those lands which boast the movements of civilization, and it must command all the instrumentalities of education. At least such is the theory of the constitution of the modern world. It is to be suspected that, as a matter of fact, mind is one of those modern monarchs who reign, but do not govern. That old House

of Commons, that popular chamber in which the passions, the prejudices, the inborn, unthinking affections long ago repudiated by mind, have their full representation, controls much the greater part of the actual conduct of affairs. To come out of the figure, reasoned thought is, though perhaps the presiding, not yet the regnant force in the world. In life and in literature it is subordinate. The future may belong to it; but the present and past do not. Faith and virtue do not wear its livery; friendship, loyalty, patriotism, do not derive their motives from it. It does not furnish the material for those masses of habit, of unquestioned tradition, and of treasured belief which are the ballast of every steady ship of state, enabling it to spread its sails safely to the breezes of progress, and even to stand before the storms of revolution. And this is a fact which has its reflection in literature. There is a literature of reasoned thought; but by far the greater part of those writings which we reckon worthy of

that great name is the product, not of reasoned thought, but of the imagination and of the spiritual vision of those who see, — writings winged, not with knowledge, but with sympathy, with sentiment, with heartiness. Even the literature of reasoned thought gets its life, not from its logic, but from the spirit, the insight, and the inspiration which are the vehicle of its logic. Thought presides, but sentiment has the executive powers; the motive functions belong to feeling.

"Many people give many theories of literary composition," says the most natural and stimulating of English critics, "and Dr. Blair, whom we will read, is sometimes said to have exhausted the subject; but, unless he has proved the contrary, we believe that the knack in style is to write like a human being. Some think they must be wise, some elaborate, some concise; Tacitus wrote like a pair of stays; some startle us, as Thomas Carlyle, or a comet, inscribing with his tail. But legibility is given

to those who neglect these notions, and are willing to be themselves, to write their own thoughts in their own words, in the simplest words, in the words wherein they were thought. . . . Books are for various purposes, — tracts to teach, almanacs to sell, poetry to make pastry; but this is the rarest sort of a book, — a book to read. As Dr. Johnson said, 'Sir, a good book is one you can hold in your hand, and take to the fire.' Now there are extremely few books which can, with any propriety, be so treated. When a great author, as Grote or Gibbon, has devoted a whole life of horrid industry to the composition of a large history, one feels one ought not to touch it with a mere hand, — it is not respectful. The idea of slavery hovers over the Decline and Fall. Fancy a stiffly dressed gentleman, in a stiff chair, slowly writing that stiff compilation in a stiff hand; it is enough to stiffen you for life."

It is devoutly to be wished that we might learn to prepare the best soils for mind, the

best associations and companionships, the least possible sophistication. We are busy enough nowadays finding out the best ways of fertilizing and stimulating mind; but that is not quite the same thing as discovering the best soils for it, and the best atmospheres. Our culture is, by erroneous preference, of the reasoning faculty, as if that were all of us. Is it not the instinctive discontent of readers seeking stimulating contact with authors that has given us the present almost passionately spoken dissent from the standards set themselves by the realists in fiction, dissatisfaction with mere recording or observation? And is not realism working out upon itself the revenge its enemies would fain compass? Must not all April Hopes exclude from their number the hope of immortality?

The rule for every man is, not to depend on the education which other men prepare for him, — not even to consent to it; but to strive to see things as they are, and to be himself as he is. Defeat lies in self-surrender.

III

ON AN AUTHOR'S CHOICE OF COMPANY

III

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ONCE and again, it would seem, a man is born into the world belated. Strayed out of a past age, he comes among us like an alien, lives removed and singular, and dies a stranger. There was a touch of this strangeness in Charles Lamb. Much as he was loved and befriended, he was not much understood; for he drew aloof in his studies, affected a "self-pleasing quaintness" in his style, took no pains to hit the taste of his day, wandered at sweet liberty in an age which could scarcely have bred such another. "Hang the age!" he cried. "I will write for antiquity." And he did. He wrote as if it were still Shakespeare's day; made the authors of that spacious time his constant companions and study; and deliberately became himself "the last of the Elizabethans." When a new book came out, he said, he always read an old one.

The case ought, surely, to put us occasionally upon reflecting. May an author not, in some degree, by choosing his literary company, choose also his literary character, and so, when he comes to write, write himself back to his masters? May he not, by examining his own tastes and yielding himself obedient to his natural affinities, join what congenial group of writers he will? The question can be argued very strongly in the affirmative, and that not alone because of Charles Lamb's case. It might be said that Lamb was antique only in the forms of his speech; that he managed very cleverly to hit the taste of his age in the substance of what he wrote, for all the phraseology had so strong a flavor of quaintness and was not at all in the mode of the day. It would not be easy to prove that; but it really does not matter. In his tastes, certainly, Lamb was an old author, not a new one; a "modern antique," as Hood called him. He wrote for his own age, of course, because there was no other age at hand to

write for, and the age he liked best was past and gone; but he wrote what he fancied the great generations gone by would have liked, and what, as it has turned out in the generosity of fortune, subsequent ages have warmly loved and reverently canonized him for writing; as if there were a casual taste that belongs to a day and generation, and also a permanent taste which is without date, and he had hit the latter.

Great authors are not often men of fashion. Fashion is always a harness and restraint, whether it be fashion in dress or fashion in vice or fashion in literary art; and a man who is bound by it is caught and formed in a fleeting mode. The great writers are always innovators; for they are always frank, natural, and downright, and frankness and naturalness always disturb, when they do not wholly break down, the fixed and complacent order of fashion. No genuine man can be deliberately in the fashion, indeed, in what he says, if he have any movement of thought or individuality in him.

He remembers what Aristotle says, or if he does not, his own pride and manliness fill him with the thought instead. The very same action that is noble if done for the satisfaction of one's own sense of right or purpose of self-development, said the Stagirite, may, if done to satisfy others, become menial and slavish. "It is the object of any action or study that is all-important," and if the author's chief object be to please he is condemned already. The true spirit of authorship is a spirit of liberty which scorns the slave's trick of imitation. It is a masterful spirit of conquest within the sphere of ideas and of artistic form, — an impulse of empire and origination.

Of course a man may choose, if he will, to be less than a free author. He may become a reporter; for there is such a thing as reporting for books as well as reporting for newspapers, and there have been reporters so amazingly clever that their very aptness and wit constitute them a sort of immortals. You have proof

of this in Horace Walpole, at whose hands gossip and compliment receive a sort of apotheosis. Such men hold the secret of a kind of alchemy by which things trivial and temporary may be transmuted into literature. But they are only inspired reporters, after all; and while a man was wishing, he might wish to be more, and climb to better company.

Every man must, of course, whether he will or not, feel the spirit of the age in which he lives and thinks and does his work; and the mere contact will direct and form him more or less. But to wish to serve the spirit of the age at any sacrifice of individual naturalness or conviction, however small, is to harbor the germ of a destroying disease. Every man who writes ought to write for immortality, even though he be of the multitude that die at their graves; and the standards of immortality are of no single age. There are many qualities and causes that give permanency to a book, but universal vogue during the author's lifetime is not one of them.

Many authors now immortal have enjoyed the applause of their own generations; many authors now universally admired will, let us hope, pass on to an easy immortality. The praise of your own day is no absolute disqualification; but it may be if it be given for qualities which your friends are the first to admire, for 't is likely they will also be the last. There is a greater thing than the spirit of the age, and that is the spirit of the ages. It is present in your own day; it is even dominant then, with a sort of accumulated power and mastery. If you can strike it, you will strike, as it were, into the upper air of your own time, where the forces are which run from age to age. Lower down, where you breathe, is the more inconstant air of opinion, inhaled, exhaled, from day to day, — the variant currents, the forces that will carry you, not forward, but hither and thither.

We write nowadays a great deal with our eyes circumspectly upon the tastes of our neighbors, but very little with our attention

bent upon our own natural, self-speaking thoughts and the very truth of the matter whereof we are discoursing. Now and again, it is true, we are startled to find how the age relishes still an old-fashioned romance, if written with a new-fashioned vigor and directness; how quaint and simple and lovely things, as well as what is altogether modern and analytic and painful, bring our most judicious friends crowding, purses in hand, to the book-stalls; and for a while we are puzzled to see worn-out styles and past modes revived. But we do not let these things seriously disturb our study of prevailing fashions. These books of adventure are not at all, we assure ourselves, in the true spirit of the age, with its realistic knowledge of what men really do think and purpose, and the taste for them must be only for the moment or in jest. We need not let our surprise at occasional flurries and variations in the literary market cloud or discredit our analysis of the real taste of the day, or suffer ourselves to be be-

trayed into writing romances, however much we might rejoice to be delivered from the drudgery of sociological study, and made free to go afield with our imaginations upon a joyous search for hidden treasure or knightly adventure.

And yet it is quite likely, after all, that the present age is transient. Past ages have been. It is probable that the objects and interests now so near us, looming dominant in all the foreground of our day, will sometime be shifted and lose their place in the perspective. That has happened with the near objects and exaggerated interests of other days, so violently sometimes as to submerge and thrust out of sight whole libraries of books. It will not do to reckon upon the persistence of new things. 'T were best to give them time to make trial of the seasons. The old things of art and taste and thought are the permanent things. We know that they are because they have lasted long enough to grow old; and we deem it

safe to assess the spirit of the age by the same test. No age adds a great deal to what it received from the age that went before it; no time gets an air all its own. The same atmosphere holds from age to age; it is only the little movements of the air that are new. In the intervals when the trades do not blow, fleeting cross-winds venture abroad, the which if a man wait for he may lose his voyage.

No man who has anything to say need stop and bethink himself whom he may please or displease in the saying of it. He has but one day to write in, and that is his own. He need not fear that he will too much ignore it. He will address the men he knows when he writes, whether he be conscious of it or not; he may dismiss all fear on that score and use his liberty to the utmost. There are some things that can have no antiquity and must ever be without date, and genuineness and spirit are of their number. A man who has these must ever be "timely," and at the same time fit to last, if he

can get his qualities into what he writes. He may freely read, too, what he will that is congenial, and form himself by companionships that are chosen simply because they are to his taste; that is, if he be genuine and in very truth a man of independent spirit. Lamb would have written "for antiquity" with a vengeance had his taste for the quaint writers of an elder day been an affectation, or the authors he liked men themselves affected and ephemeral. No age this side antiquity would ever have vouchsafed him a glance or a thought. But it was not an affectation, and the men he preferred were as genuine and as spirited as he was. He was simply obeying an affinity and taking cheer after his own kind. A man born into the real patriciate of letters may take his pleasure in what company he will without taint or loss of caste; may go confidently abroad in the free world of books and choose his comradeships without fear of offense.

More than that, there is no other way in

which he can form himself, if he would have his power transcend a single age. He belittles himself who takes from the world no more than he can get from the speech of his own generation. The only advantage of books over speech is that they may hold from generation to generation, and reach, not a small group merely, but a multitude of men; and a man who writes without being a man of letters is curtailed of his heritage. It is in this world of old and new that he must form himself if he would in the end belong to it and increase its bulk of treasure. If he has conned the new theories of society, but knows nothing of Burke; the new notions about fiction, and has not read his Scott and his Richardson; the new criminology, and wots nothing of the old human nature; the new religions, and has never felt the power and sanctity of the old, it is much the same as if he had read Ibsen and Maeterlinck, and had never opened Shakespeare. How is he to know wholesome air from foul, good

company from bad, visions from nightmares? He has framed himself for the great art and handicraft of letters only when he has taken all the human parts of literature as if they were without date, and schooled himself in a catholic sanity of taste and judgment.

Then he may very safely choose what company his own work shall be done in, — in what manner, and under what masters. He cannot choose amiss for himself or for his generation if he choose like a man, without light whim or weak affectation; not like one who chooses a costume, but like one who chooses a character. What is it, let him ask himself, that renders a bit of writing a "piece of literature"? It is reality. A "wood-note wild," sung unpremeditated and out of the heart; a description written as if with an undimmed and seeing eye upon the very object described; an exposition that lays bare the very soul of the matter; a motive truly revealed; anger that is righteous and justly spoken; mirth that has its sources pure;

phrases to find the heart of a thing, and a heart seen in things for the phrases to find; an unaffected meaning set out in language that is its own, — such are the realities of literature. Nothing else is of the kin. Phrases used for their own sake; borrowed meanings which the borrower does not truly care for; an affected manner; an acquired style; a hollow reason; words that are not fit; things which do not live when spoken, — these are its falsities, which die in the handling.

The very top breed of what is unreal is begotten by imitation. Imitators succeed sometimes, and flourish, even while a breath may last; but "imitate and be damned" is the inexorable threat and prophecy of fate with regard to the permanent fortunes of literature. That has been notorious this long time past. It is more worth noting, lest some should not have observed it, that there are other and subtler ways of producing what is unreal. There are the mixed kinds of writing, for example. Ar-

gument is real if it come vital from the mind; narrative is real if the thing told have life and the narrator unaffectedly see it while he speaks; but to narrate and argue in the same breath is naught. Take, for instance, the familiar example of the early history of Rome. Make up your mind what was the truth of the matter, and then, out of the facts as you have disentangled them, construct a firmly touched narrative, and the thing you create is real, has the confidence and consistency of life. But mix the narrative with critical comment upon other writers and their variant versions of the tale, show by a nice elaboration of argument the whole conjectural basis of the story, set your reader the double task of doubting and accepting, rejecting and constructing, and at once you have touched the whole matter with unreality. The narrative by itself might have had an objective validity; the argument by itself an intellectual firmness, sagacity, vigor, that would have sufficed to make and keep it potent; but

together they confound each other, destroy each other's atmosphere, make a double miscarriage. The story is rendered unlikely, and the argument obscure. This is the taint which has touched all our recent historical writing. The critical discussion and assessment of the sources of information, which used to be a thing for the private mind of the writer, now so encroach upon the open text that the story, for the sake of which we would believe the whole thing was undertaken, is oftentimes fain to sink away into the foot-notes. The process has ceased to be either pure exegesis or straightforward narrative, and history has ceased to be literature.

Nor is this our only sort of mixed writing. Our novels have become sociological studies, our poems vehicles of criticism, our sermons political manifestos. We have confounded all processes in a common use, and do not know what we would be at. We can find no better use for Pegasus than to carry our vulgar bur-

dens, no higher key for song than questionings and complainings. Fancy pulls in harness with intellectual doubt; enthusiasm walks apologetically alongside science. We try to make our very dreams engines of social reform. It is a parlous state of things for literature, and it is high time authors should take heed what company they keep. The trouble is, they all want to be "in society," overwhelmed with invitations from the publishers, well known and talked about at the clubs, named every day in the newspapers, photographed for the newsstalls; and it is so hard to distinguish between fashion and form, costume and substance, convention and truth, the things that show well and the things that last well; so hard to draw away from the writers that are new and talked about and note those who are old and walk apart, to distinguish the tones which are merely loud from the tones that are genuine, to get far enough away from the press and the hubbub to see and judge the movements of the crowd!

Some will do it. Choice spirits will arise and make conquest of us, not "in society," but with what will seem a sort of outlawry. The great growths of literature spring up in the open, where the air is free and they can be a law unto themselves. The law of life, here as elsewhere, is the law of nourishment: with what was the earth laden, and the atmosphere? Literatures are renewed, as they are originated, by uncontrived impulses of nature, as if the sap moved unbidden in the mind. Once conceive the matter so, and Lamb's quaint saying assumes a sort of gentle majesty. A man should "write for antiquity" as a tree grows into the ancient air, — this old air that has moved upon the face of the world ever since the day of creation, which has set the law of life to all things, which has nurtured the forests and won the flowers to their perfection, which has fed men's lungs with life, sped their craft upon the seas, borne abroad their songs and their cries, blown their forges to flame, and buoyed up whatever

they have contrived. 'T is a common medium, though a various life; and the figure may serve the author for instruction.

The breeding of authors is no doubt a very occult thing, and no man can set the rules of it; but at least the sort of "ampler ether" in which they are best brought to maturity is known. Writers have liked to speak of the Republic of Letters, as if to mark their freedom and equality; but there is a better phrase, namely, the Community of Letters; for that means intercourse and comradeship and a life in common. Some take up their abode in it as if they had made no search for a place to dwell in, but had come into the freedom of it by blood and birthright. Others buy the freedom with a great price, and seek out all the sights and privileges of the place with an eager thoroughness and curiosity. Still others win their way into it with a certain grace and aptitude, next best to the ease and dignity of being born to the right. But for all it is a bonny place to be. Its

comradeships are a liberal education. Some, indeed, even there, live apart; but most run always in the market-place to know what all the rest have said. Some keep special company, while others keep none at all. But all feel the atmosphere and life of the place in their several degrees.

No doubt there are national groups, and Shakespeare is king among the English, as Homer is among the Greeks, and sober Dante among his gay countrymen. But their thoughts all have in common, though speech divide them; and sovereignty does not exclude comradeship or embarrass freedom. No doubt there is many a willful, ungoverned fellow endured there without question, and many a churlish cynic, because he possesses that patent of genuineness or of a wit which strikes for the heart of things, which, without further test, secures citizenship in that free company. What a gift of tongues is there, and of prophecy! What strains of good talk, what counsel of

good judgment, what cheer of good tales, what sanctity of silent thought! The sight-seers who pass through from day to day, the press of voluble men at the gates, the affectation of citizenship by mere sojourners, the folly of those who bring new styles or affect old ones, the possession of the generations, disturb the calm of that serene community not a whit. They will entertain a man a whole decade, if he happen to stay so long, though they know all the while he can have no permanent place among them.

'T would be a vast gain to have the laws of that community better known than they are. Even the first principles of its constitution are singularly unfamiliar. It is not a community of writers, but a community of letters. One gets admission, not because he writes, — write he never so cleverly, like a gentleman and a man of wit, — but because he is literate, a true initiate into the secret craft and mystery of letters. What that secret is a man may know, even

though he cannot practice or appropriate it. If a man can see the permanent element in things, — the true sources of laughter, the real fountains of tears, the motives that strike along the main lines of conduct, the acts which display the veritable characters of men, the trifles that are significant, the details that make the mass, — if he know these things, and can also choose words with a like knowledge of their power to illuminate and reveal, give color to the eye and passion to the thought, the secret is his, and an entrance to that immortal communion.

It may be that some learn the mystery of that insight without tutors; but most must put themselves under governors and earn their initiation. While a man lives, at any rate, he can keep the company of the masters whose words contain the mystery and open it to those who can see, almost with every accent; and in such company it may at last be revealed to him, — so plainly that he may, if he will, still linger in such comradeship when he is dead.

It would seem that there are two tests which admit to that company, and that they are conclusive. The one is, Are you individual? the other, Are you conversable? "I beg pardon," said a grave wag, coming face to face with a small person of most consequential air, and putting glass to eye in calm scrutiny — "I beg pardon; but are you anybody in particular?" Such is very much the form of initiation into the permanent communion of the realm of letters. Tell them, No, but that you have done much better — you have caught the tone of a great age, studied taste, divined opportunity, courted and won a vast public, been most timely and most famous; and you shall be pained to find them laughing in your face. Tell them you are earnest, sincere, consecrate to a cause, an apostle and reformer, and they will still ask you, "But are you anybody in particular?" They will mean, "Were you your own man in what you thought, and not a puppet? Did you speak with an individual note and distinc-

tion that marked you able to think as well as to speak, — to be yourself in thoughts and in words also?" "Very well, then; you are welcome enough."

"That is, if you be also conversable." It is plain enough what they mean by that, too. They mean, if you have spoken in such speech and spirit as can be understood from age to age, and not in the pet terms and separate spirit of a single day and generation. Can the old authors understand you, that you would associate with them? Will men be able to take your meaning in the differing days to come? Or is it perishable matter of the day that you deal in — little controversies that carry no lasting principle at their heart; experimental theories of life and science, put forth for their novelty and with no test of their worth; pictures in which fashion looms very large, but human nature shows very small; things that please everybody, but instruct no one; mere fancies that are an end in themselves? Be you never

so clever an artist in words and in ideas, if they be not the words that wear and mean the same thing, and that a thing intelligible, from age to age, the ideas that shall hold valid and luminous in whatever day or company, you may clamor at the gate till your lungs fail and get never an answer.

For that to which you seek admission is a veritable "community." In it you must be able to be, and to remain, conversable. How are you to test your preparation meanwhile, unless you look to your comradeships now while yet it is time to learn? Frequent the company in which you may learn the speech and the manner which are fit to last. Take to heart the admirable example you shall see set you there of using speech and manner to speak your real thought and be genuinely and simply yourself.

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